

Matthew 22:15-40

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Date: 19 January 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I want to add my welcome to Jeremy's. My name is Dan Gifford, and it's very good to be part of this sermon series on Matthew. On the back of your bulletin, there's a great introduction to this section that we're in, and you can read that if you start drifting off during the sermon.

It is the last week of Jesus' life before he's crucified. He is in Jerusalem. Everything is pointing to his crucifixion and then his glorious resurrection as well. And we're in this situation where the religious leaders put Jesus on a hot seat, and they try to trick him into saying things that will cause the authorities and the people to turn against him. They want an excuse to be able to send Jesus to his death. And so they confront him with these three hot-button issues. And listen to what they are. One has to do with taxes and politics. The second question has to do with death and sexuality. And the third hot-button issue has to do with what true religion is. So it's like they're checking off all the hot-button issues. As I've mentioned before in other sermons, I live in

Richmond, and for a number of years we had Jewish neighbors with whom we became very close and really like part of their family. They had people over for meals all the time. They had the gift of hospitality.

And one of the things they did was they also had an open house on the Sabbath as well, inviting friends and neighbors to come. And many were originally from Israel or Eastern Europe, and the conversations were very, very interesting. If you think about taboo or controversial issues that we have that you're not supposed to talk about in polite society, you can think of politics, religion, sexuality, death. Well, you couldn't really go over for a meal at their house unless you talked about one or all of those things. Inevitably, those would be brought up. And there were great debates, sometimes very heated, great conversations. And, you know, often, and I think actually inevitably, if I think back, God came into the picture. You ended up talking about God. And this is what happens here. Jesus answers these hot-button issues with astonishing wisdom. And in doing this, he actually draws his listeners into a living relationship with God. That's his purpose here.

And in fact, in doing that, he also raises those enemies up and the people who are listening up into a way that allows them to flourish if they receive his truth. He shows them that God is Lord and Savior of every part of the questioner's lives and that he deserves all of their love in return. And in this way, they would flourish. God has a deep, Jesus has a deep love for these people who have malice against him. And those three questions are amazingly relevant to us today, not just because of the content, but also because we too can challenge God in those areas of our life and hot-button issues.

[3 : 41] And we also need God to bring us, to lead us into a living relationship with God, who is the one who is our Lord and our Savior. So let's look at those questions. The first question is about taxes and politics. And that's verses 15 through 22. Now, the Pharisees have been plotting together for a while, and they come up with this question. And it's a really good one. Whether it was right to pay the tribute tax to the Roman emperor Caesar, Tiberius Caesar. It was a tough question because at that time, as you probably know, Israel was a satellite state of Rome. And it was filled, and this empire they were part of, unwillingly, was filled with idols. And they spoke of Caesar as though he was divine. And so you can see this question they ask in verse 17. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Is it right, in other words, for the people of God to support this evil empire?

Well, you can see how tricky the question is. An answer of yes would turn many of the people against and popular opinion would go against him immediately. Most Israelites hated being a colony of the Roman empire. But to say no would mean being charged by the Roman authorities. And to make this a really good setup, the Pharisees who hated the tax brought along the Herodians, who were friends of the Roman authorities, into that question. They come together, and they've got all the people there in the public square of the temple. It's a no-win situation. They've thought it through. But Jesus answers with amazing authority and wisdom. Because the first thing he does is to reveal what is in their hearts.

They are filled with malice, he says. That's what's going on. That is your motivation. Let's put that on the table. Secondly, you're hypocrites. And he shows them this by asking them for a coin.

And they bring it to him right away. So obviously they're using the coin. They're paying the tax. It's something that they're making use of. And he asks them, whose likeness and whose inscription is this? Well, immediately when they show him the coin, they say, Caesars. That's what's on there.

And you know, you can buy these coins on eBay. I don't know if you ever thought of it. It'll cost you a few thousand dollars. But there is the same coin that Jesus was pointing out and holding before them. And on the front it says, Tiberius Caesar, worshipful son of the divine Augustus.

[6 : 32] It's like a portable idol. It's no wonder that Israel was distressed by having to use these coins. But what these Pharisees are doing is they are admitting that that coin belongs to Caesar.

And Jesus tells them in verse 21, then render, literally give back to Caesar what is Caesar's. And that's because there were benefits that Israel received from Rome. The minting of coins allowed the economy to flourish. It allowed for there to be an order to the economy. And it was a time of general peace. Jesus is teaching that governments are a servant of God for the well-being of people, even when those governments don't honor God or believe him. In fact, Jesus will say to pilot the governor just before his crucifixion, he'll say to pilot, you would have no authority unless it was given to you by God himself. God is over these governments. He uses them for his purposes. He cares for and he orders societies this way. And in our own day, we receive many benefits that come from the state. We get education, our garbage pickup, our water. Actually, I'm thinking a lot about this because the municipal taxes are coming up. These benefits from the state. And from highways to medical care to the standards for food and business and banking, we receive this. And in fact, the greatest human suffering often takes place in countries where there's lawlessness or there is dysfunctional government. So Jesus' implication in saying render to Caesar is that we respect government as God's instrument to provide good order and care. If there is mismanagement of funds or misuse of government power, rendering to Caesar means giving back to the state by being involved in the electoral process in speaking up about what is right and what is wrong in government. We actually honor God as we contribute our time and our money to right government. So what does this mean? As you pay taxes in the next couple of months, you can actually say you are worshiping God as you pay your taxes. That's a totally foreign way of thinking about taxes in my mind. But that's what we can do because of what Jesus is saying. Render to Caesar what is Caesar. But in the second part of Jesus' answer, he says the most important thing. He says, render to God what is God's. Now he's speaking to the hearts of the Pharisees here because having taught to respect the state, Jesus now says there is also a limitation to the state.

You've received many things from Caesar, but you have received everything from God. In fact, like the coin had Caesar's image, you yourselves have God's image imprinted on you. You are not your own. You were bought at a price. Jesus Christ himself. Everything belongs to you. Everything about you belongs to him.

When King David received the generous offering to build the temple, he said something which is so important for us now. He prayed to God and he'd received millions of dollars in today's dollars worth of gold, silver for the temple that would be built. And he said this, everything comes from you, O Lord. And we have given you only what comes from your hand. The Pharisees knew this teaching.

And Jesus was bringing it home to each of them personally. Their material wealth, their families, their relationships, their own gifts and abilities, the hope they have, the covenant they have with God, all of it comes from God himself. And therefore their lives belong to the living God. It is time to render their lives to them, to Jesus Christ, to God himself with joy and with thankfulness as King David did.

[11 : 11] And Jesus is inviting them, but also us right now, into a relationship of the God of grace, the God who gives all to us. You and I owe God everything. At times what the Caesar or the state wants will contradict this. And then Christians have to choose to obey God rather than the state.

Many Christians have made that choice today. They live in countries where they are persecuted for their faith. And they make that hard choice of honoring God in contradiction to the state.

And so Jesus' answer draws us into this living reality of God. What is holding you back, he is saying. Render to God what is God's. So when you give to God of your time, your possessions, or your gifts, do you grudge that giving? Or is it with an open and thankful hand? Because you are giving back to God.

It is an expression of joy and thanks for the immeasurable gifts that we receive at his hands. Render to God what is God's. Well, the Pharisees marvel at this answer. And they are silent.

And I wonder what they were thinking as they walked away. The wonderful thing in the book of Acts is that it tells us that a couple of months after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, a lot of priests came to a living faith in God and began to follow Jesus Christ. Was it partly because of what Jesus said? We don't know. But what we do know is that they had expected to trap Jesus, but instead he opens a door for them into God's grace and his loving rule.

[13 : 02] What a blessing that is, that this is the gift not only for those priests, but for each of us as well. May we render to God what is God's. Now the second question comes from the Sadducees later that day in verse 22 through 33. The Sadducees, you may not know, they were the sophisticated ones in society in Jerusalem. They studied the Greek culture and the trends. They were up on all the latest philosophical thinking. And they were the aristocracy. They were wealthy. They had political clout. And they ran the temple life, which was the center of society in Jerusalem. And unlike the first question of the Pharisees, which was meant to harm Jesus, the Sadducees just wanted to ridicule him, to really make him look bad in front of the people. And they asked this question about resurrection and eternal life. Now we should know that they, unlike the Pharisees, believed only the five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch at the beginning of the Old Testament, was really God's word. And so that's all they would accept for the authority. And they also did not believe in miracles. They did not believe in God intervening and in a living way transforming lives. And most importantly, they did not believe in the miracle of the resurrection of the body. So they asked this hot button question about death and sexuality with regard to the resurrection. And it's based on a law from Deuteronomy 25, their question, that provides for the care of widows by brothers. It says, if a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. And so what they do is they bring up this wild scenario where this woman marries a husband and then he dies very quickly. And then the brother marries and it does it seven times. Now you would think by the fifth or sixth time those brothers would be a little worried about marrying. But anyway, they keep going in that way. And finally, the wife dies as well. And they say in verse 28, this question, in the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her. They all had sexual relationships. What is going to go on? It's going to be a confusing mess. Well, the question had everything, death, sexuality, theology. And they likely had asked that same question of the Pharisees and had stumped them. Pharisees didn't know how to answer it.

But Jesus answers them in verse 29 by saying, you are wrong. Literally, you are being led astray because you don't know the scriptures and you don't know the power of God. Because in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but they are like angels in heaven. And what Jesus is telling them is that they were led astray because they were students of the culture around them, but they didn't know the Bible. They didn't know God through his word. And therefore, they had closed their minds to God's power to save, his power to restore, his power to forgive. They didn't know that God, even though that's who he is in his essence. They thought of it as a general, it was like a straw man, the idea of the resurrection. It was a situation where at the last day, people would be resuscitated.

So you could continue the family life that you had when you died. But what they didn't understand, Jesus says, is God's power that goes far beyond resuscitation because of Jesus' own resurrection.

And you see that power in verse 30. There is no marriage in the resurrection, he said, because people become like angels. Now, Jesus doesn't say they become angels. He says we become glorious like them.

You know that C.S. Lewis' famous quote that I've said before. He says that by the resurrection, the dullest and most uninteresting Christian that you talk with will one day be a creature, which if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. See, Jesus is describing the glory of the resurrection body. And he teaches the Sadducees from Exodus 3 that this clearly is shown in the Bible, in Scripture. Look at verse 31. He said, As for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God himself, a direct speaking to Moses in the burning bush? I am the God of Abraham, God says, and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. And because he said that, what does that mean? He is not the God of the dead, Jesus says, but the God of the living. You see, God doesn't say, I was their God, Isaac and Jacob and Abraham. I am their God. He is not the God of corpses. He is the God of living people who died years before. And God intends, you see, that our material self is exalted in the resurrection.

[18 : 39] All of you will be resurrected, not just your soul, but you, mind, body, and soul. Everything that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were, that is what is resurrected. And what that means is your individuality is preserved. You don't lose anything except your sin and the effects of sin in your life. And these glorious eternal bodies will be who we really are, who we will, who God has made us to be. And we will recognize one another in heaven. George MacDonald wrote a sermon about this. And it's in a book called Unspoken Sermons. So he probably never preached it. George MacDonald was a 19th century writer.

And he wrote on this little section. He called it the God of the living. And he said this. He said that it's by our bodies that God reveals himself to us and that we reveal ourselves to other people as well. Our bodies are necessary for that, for God to reveal himself to us and for us to be revealed to other people. And so he says this. He says, we need not only a body to convey revelation to us, but a body to reveal us to others. The new body must be like the old. Not only that, but it must be the same body, but glorified as we are glorified with all that was distinctive of each from his fellows more visible than ever before. The accidental, the non-essential, the unrevealing, the incomplete will have vanished. And that which made the body what it was in the eyes of those who love us will be tenfold more. Will not this be the resurrection of the body? Well, yes. That is the power of God. That's what his word is telling us. And God does this only for this reason, that he can be with us and with his people forever so that we can know God perfectly and be known perfectly as well.

That is salvation completed. You know, the most intimate and most loving part of being married is a tiny foretaste of the love and intimacy that we will have with Jesus in the new heaven and the new earth because of the resurrection of the body. So you see what Jesus has done here. He has brought these Sadducees into the very heart of God through this hot button issue. He loves his people. He transforms them and brings them into perfect relationship with him. And wonderfully, there is no ridicule when Jesus finished speaking. Again, there is only silence. The whole crowd that day was astonished as Jesus revealed this reality, this power, this transforming love of God, which is for them personally. And that brings us to this last question, which we'll end with. And it was a last question on the same day. And the Pharisees are back at it. They're as though they're saying, uh-oh, we're 0 for 2, Pharisees, Sadducees. We've got to try one last time here. We've been unsuccessful.

And they come back to test Jesus with a final question about religion because you can always get an argument about religion. He says this in verse 36, what is the greatest commandment? That's the question the lawyer asks. It's a question of true religion. What is the right way to worship? And it's a trick question because all of the commandments were considered great. It was like trying to choose which of your 613 kids was the best one. Who do you honor the most? Who's number one? But Jesus answers with these very familiar words to us in verses 37 to the end of the passage here to 40. He says, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. Well, that's a sermon series. But what we can say in one sentence is that all commandments, Jesus is saying, are an expression of God's love for us. That's what they are. And he starts by saying why we love God.

[23 : 15] It's because he first loved us. He is the Lord your God, Jesus starts by saying. He is yours. The one who has brought you into relationship with him. He is the one to the Pharisees who has rescued them from Egypt, who has given manna when they were hungry in the wilderness. When water was gone, he brought them water miraculously. He gave them a new land. He gave them bounty in that land. He gave them the temple.

And now, Jesus is there as the one to rescue them and us in the deepest way in the forgiveness of our sins, reconciling us forever to the God who is living. He has chosen to be your God out of his love for you. And that's why we seek to love him. That's the why. And then the how do we love God?

It's with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. You actually see all mentioned four times. It is from the center of our being where our ambitions and our appetites come, our longings, our convictions. It is the decisions that we make. All of them lead to loving God. And with all our energy and strength, our bodies working. In other words, all of you is devoted to him because you are completely in love with him. That's the command. And the first commandment is that you give your all to him. Well, what do we love? Now, here's the genius of Jesus. Because he brings together the love for our neighbor with the love for God. He says we cannot love God without loving our neighbors. They go together. He fuses the love of our neighbor with our love of God. You can't obey God without loving your neighbor. You can't love God without loving your neighbor. John says you can't love the God you can't see if you don't love the neighbor who you can see. His image is on human beings and you will love those who are in his image, even when they are nasties. Now, the early church was known for this. When you read about historical writings at that time, they were known for their deep care for each other. They gave up meals if somebody was hungry to provide for each other.

They visited each other in prison constantly when they were persecuted. They took orphaned children into their home at the drop of a hat. The universal testimony was that the Christians were the most merciful, the most kind and generous people around. And it must be that way now. This is what Jesus is saying. May it be so at St. John's as well. Are you known for this in your neighborhood? Are you known for this in your church? We're going to, in a few minutes, a very few minutes, we are going to pray for Ratanak International Ministry. And that's a ministry that St. John supports that rescues and educates former sex slaves in Cambodia. And on Thursday, I was with the missions committee as Brian McConaughy, who started the ministry, shared how they had expanded very recently to minister to women who were kidnapped and trafficked into forced marriages in other countries. Many of those women experienced awful things in those places. They are abused, they are imprisoned, and they are living like slaves. And some of these women are found, and they are able to be sent back because of bilateral agreements that Cambodia has reached between these countries. And they come back, these women traumatized to the airport and filled with shame. And Ratanak has just finished building a residence and training center right near that airport. And what happens is that they come from that airport into a caring community with counselors, with food, with training for a new job and a way to start a new life.

And the policy of the staff is not to share the gospel of Jesus at all when they come. But Brian said that within 48 hours, they demand to know why they are caring for them in such an extraordinary way.

[27 : 53] And then the staff can speak about God's love. And they say, it's because you are infinitely precious to Jesus. Because he died for you. Because he treasures you. You are the most precious being on earth to him.

And we are loving you because we love God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our soul. Now, if we have people, if we love people in this way, Jesus is saying, they will ask about why.

There will be opportunities to share about who Jesus is and why we are loving in this way. It is because we love the Lord your God with all our hearts, minds, and soul. You can see that it's through this hot button issue again that Jesus brings the Pharisees into the reality of God's love and into their lives.

More than that, he actually raises people up. He raises the Pharisees up and says, here's the way to flourish. Do we know that life now? Do we give all of ourself to him, knowing that this is how we become truly human? This is how we become what God intends us to be. So by the grace of God, as you leave this passage, know that you can use hot button issues. It's not a threat. They are opportunities.

There are ways that we can lead people into the gospel of grace. So if the issue is sexuality and identity, Jesus is our identity. We are complete in him. If it's beginning of life and end of life issues, we can say that God has created all life. It is precious to him whether it is an unborn life or a suffering life. Jesus redeems all suffering. If it's climate change, God has made creation good and he's made us stewards of it. He will renew it one day by Jesus. How do we care for it in the right way?

[29 : 59] And then finally, religious pluralism. The gospel says that there is a God who has made the world and everything in it. He is Lord of heaven and earth and the marvelous thing is that he has come for the whole world in grace and love because none of us can come to him in our own power. He has come in the person of Jesus. We don't have clever answers. Jesus does. He is that answer to all of those questions. May we exalt him as we love our neighbor as ourself and love the Lord our God with all our heart, our mind, our soul, and our strength. Amen.